

HEAD OF THE CLASS

BY MARK KRAMER

Without ... ctions, PPS ... y mid-2015

	2013 est.	2014 est.
Revenue (Millions)	\$ 511.68	\$ 512.13
Operating Expense	\$ 524.58	\$ 535.07
Operating Profit (Funding Gap)	\$ (12.90)	(\$ 22.94)
Beginning Balance (F)	\$ 30.69	\$ 37.79
Year-end Balance (F)	\$ 17.79	\$ 14.85
	Meets 5% Fund Balance Requirement	No

Linda Lane still has the musical theater playbills she collected in the 1960s when she was an eighth-grader falling in love with the arts.

"We're trying desperately to hang onto arts in our schools," she says, "because we all know that arts programs have taken a hit nationally. But we're an arts city." She nods her head, emphasizing the point: "I mean, we're an arts city!"

For Pittsburgh School Superintendent Linda Lane, discussing less-than-encouraging budget figures has been an ongoing part of her job, as was the case when she made a presentation during a Superintendent's Teacher Round Table last year.

Now, as superintendent of Pittsburgh Public Schools, she recalls those playbills while reflecting upon the duties of managing an over-extended district with increasingly tighter budgets.

Lane spends a lot of time grappling with her district's priorities—the arts being one among many—and its academic and fiscal challenges. As a whole, her students are underachieving. And the district has been scrambling for several years to avoid or reduce projected deficits that threaten to destabilize budgets.

But she also sees great potential in the students and the district, and believes high achievement is within reach. “I think part of my role is to take advantage of opportunities to go before students and encourage them to dream big and set goals for themselves,” says Lane. “I talk with parents and want them to understand our commitment, the other issues notwithstanding. I think being a voice for that is important. I also believe I need to be a model of a learner myself. A lot of our students know I'm a reader. I want them to see me as someone who sees herself as also needing to get better.”

Still, the challenges ahead are significant.

As Pittsburgh's population and school enrollments have decreased—including a 28 percent drop in the number of district students over the last decade—school officials have made difficult and unpopular decisions to end programs, close schools, furlough staff and increase class sizes. State and federal revenues have declined, with losses amounting to \$37.8 million last year alone. Ballooning deficits are forecast for each of the next three years and are expected to reach \$53 million in 2016.

Employee costs are driving much of this, says Lane, with health care expenses increasing faster than inflation. Also, the state retirement system is underfunded, and retirement costs are set to increase significantly by 2015.

Ask Lane about “low-hanging fruit”—manageable cuts that haven't been made—and she responds, “I think we've done the low hanging and the medium hanging. It's not like you can go in and say we're just going to get rid of 'x' and that'll take our student costs down. It's all through [the system]. Plans have been made, salaries have been set, negotiated agreements have been put together.”

Lane has tried to do her part by forgoing \$35,000 in pay increases and bonuses in the last two years. And she knows that making the district fiscally sound is at the heart of her highest priority: student achievement. Following several years of gradual improvement, however, state test scores fell last year.

While she acknowledges that many Pittsburgh schools are doing commendable work, Lane emphasizes that teachers must maintain a robust curriculum and high expectations, and rely on precise data—even day-to-day, mental-snapshot assessments—on how children are performing. The same principle applies, she says, to teachers, who need individualized professional development and evaluation.

As in other urban districts, white or more economically advantaged students have better test scores and graduation rates overall than African American students or those from low-income families. Lane contends teachers need to be sure that “[we are] not letting race, poverty, English-language-learner status get us to a place where we think, ‘Well, they're a really nice child, but I don't know if they're going to be able to get this.’”

Lane recalls telling urban education expert Pedro Noguera that Pittsburgh has put in place the same highly regarded approaches used in other districts to increase academic performance and close the achievement gap. Then she asked him what else could be done.

“His diagnosis was that we need to do what we're doing better. I once worked with someone who said in order for a new initiative to have the impact that it should, you have to have 80 percent of the people doing it with 80 percent fidelity. If you don't get to that 80–80 place, you're not going to know whether it works because not enough people are doing it the right way. So getting to that 80–80 place is what we have to do.”

She tries to reflect that determination as she connects personally with students and their families. Having begun her career as a first-grade teacher, Lane wants to “say something, while I'm with [students], that leaves them better than I found them.”

As for parents, she recognizes that some know how to advocate for their children, while others may not. And some can guide their children toward a college education, while others may not. It's the district's job, she says, to serve as “a safety net for kids who need a safety net,” regardless of family background.

That's why Lane likes to admonish students to stay in school and to finish their homework, even as she greets them warmly.

“I'm on their case, and I'm on their side.” *h*